

Plumbing the Depths of Inky Blackness

*"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the Sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea"*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In March 1959 Bill Kunert, Glyn Davies and Michael Tobias penetrated 200 feet into an underground spring at Mole Creek. The divers were attempting to explore the resurgence of the River Alph, which disappears into a siphon inside the fabulously decorated Kubla Khan Cave before emerging about a mile away on the other side of the hill. It was the first cave dive made in Tasmania (Frauca 1959).

Kunert carried a sealed beam light of 12 volts powered from a lead wire connected to a battery on the surface. The lead ran along a 200 foot lifeline tied around the waist of Kunert and fed from the surface. Tobias and Davies were clipped into the line with karabiners. With Kunert leading the three divers submerged and disappeared. They had to dive head first through a bottleneck that was so narrow their aqualungs scraped the rocks.

At the end of the 200 foot line the divers surfaced in an airbell. Clinging to the crumbly mud walls, their breath steaming around their masked faces, the frogmen stared in wonder at the eerie sights in an underground stream. Their teeth were chattering, their limbs were almost numb and they found breathing difficult underwater in the intense cold. There was only one thing to do -retreat. Had they gone on they might never have come back as the cold waters would have claimed their lives (Frauca 1960).

In February 1965, Brian Barlow, Lance Barlow and Carl Summer borrowed 1,000 feet of baling twine from nearby residents and managed to penetrate 750 feet into the resurgence -an Australian record (The Mercury 27-2-1965). On their next attempt the team claimed to have penetrated a distance of 1,685 feet.

In 1974 Bill Kinnear and two companions made a series of dives using a base fed line with a communication cable which enabled the surface crew to talk with the divers when they surfaced in air pockets. Two of the divers surfaced in an air pocket 80 metres into the resurgence and using their 'black box' device they informed the surface crew that the third diver had failed to show up. They were informed that 120 metres of line had been fed out to the missing member who had apparently become entangled underwater. He eventually surfaced in the air pocket festooned in rope. The team continued on, but not without further incident;

'The torches did nothing but reflect a blinding glow and all I could see were my own bubbles...I had the rope in my hands but didn't know which way along the rope was out and which was towards Bill,...I pulled in yards of the stuff, first from one direction and then the other, and finally felt Bill pulling at the rope and swam to him and surfaced. Both air tanks were approaching the half full mark and return to the surface became urgent' (Robertson 1977).

On a subsequent dive Bill Kinnear pushed ahead alone. His single air tank was drawn to half full when he turned around at a point 1,200 feet into the resurgence. Plans to return were abandoned when Kinnear died in a hunting accident a few days later.

It wasn't until February 1978 that the connection into Kubla Khan Cave was completed by Ron Allum, Phil Prust and Peter Stace (Stace 1979). The connection was surveyed by Nick Hume and myself in 1983, revealing 1.1 km of passage containing three siphons of 500m, 120m and 40m length. The length of the siphons varies considerably depending on water levels.

The first exchange through trip soon followed. Nick Hume and Stuart Nicholas dived from the resurgence end whilst Rolan Eberhard and Duncan Holland abseiled into Kubla Khan at the other end of the system. The teams met up in Cairn Hall, where the diving and caving gear was swapped, then each team continued out in the opposite direction. So far everything had gone according to plan. However, there was a lack of solid natural anchors to tie the line off at the start of the third siphon, so Nick had brought along an onion bag which he stuffed with mud for this purpose. Unbeknownst to the second diving team, the onion bag anchor had leaked its contents so that as they reeled in the line, so too was the now useless anchor pulled into the sump towards them. Rolan and Duncan were soon confronted with an empty onion bag in the middle of the siphon. Duncan was unperturbed, so leaving Rolan with the reel which was their only security, he swam on until he surfaced on the other side of the siphon -it was Duncan's first cave dive! They continued on their way out but became separated again in the first long siphon. Duncan had got entangled in the line and by the time he sorted himself out he was completely disoriented -with no compass or detectable current he couldn't tell which way was in and which was out. He took a guess which proved to be correct -Duncan seemed to lead a charmed existence.

Recalling those early days now I think we had all been very lucky. I remember getting scared on numerous occasions, as we learnt the rules of survival in cave diving by trial and error. One hard-learned lesson in particular is worth relating. Union Cave at Mole Creek had received brief diving forays by Toby Clark in 1971. In 1979, Frank Salt and Peter Cover passed three short siphons but were unable to scale the sheer wall leading out of the water on the far side. Rolan and I ventured in there soon after we started cave diving. We passed through the first duckunder and peered into the second siphon -the water was beautifully clear and there was no silt on the bottom, so throwing caution to the wind we dived through without laying a line, which we intended to save for use later on. The third siphon was not so straightforward as the sediment we stirred up obliterated all visibility. Before losing the visibility entirely we were able to find our way some 40 metres through to the far side. We eagerly clambered out of the water and explored about 250 metres of nicely decorated cave before encountering another siphon.

We felt pleased with our discovery, but a little apprehensive about the return dive in zero visibility, so we organised some signals to communicate with by a series of 'hand-squeezes'. One squeeze meant 'Stop', two squeezes meant 'OK', and three squeezes meant 'There is a slight problem'. We set off, reeling in the line as we went, until the line unexpectedly disappeared into a narrow slot - until now we hadn't learnt the technique of rebelaying the line to prevent it being pulled sideways into hazardous restrictions, or so-called 'line traps'. Rolan attempted to follow the line into the slot but it soon became impossibly narrow. He squeezed my hand three times and I squeezed him back three times, because I didn't relish the prospect of trying to reverse our way back to the previous airspace without the line in place to guide us. He gave me three squeezes again, and I squeezed him back. My breathing rate increased as the seriousness of our situation took hold. We were probably going to die I thought, as vivid images started to roar through my brain at 100 miles per hour, one image was the tragic scene that would confront Nick when he came to retrieve our bodies. After a period of time that seemed like ages, but which was probably only a few minutes, we developed a new underwater communication signal -lots of squeezes meant 'There is a very big and very serious problem here.' Then a miracle happened -the line came free from the slot it was caught in and we were able to follow it out.

Upon surfacing we both swore never to go cave diving ever again. Our trials were not quite over however as we still had another siphon to get through -the one with no line in it, and which by now was completely silted-out. Suddenly no longer brash, I groped my way through using the line reel, and then reeled-in Rolan from the other side. We both learnt a lot about cave diving that day.

KUBLA KHAN February 1998

Chris Brown disappeared into the gloom as I struggled along behind, the gumboots I was wearing were causing considerable drag thus handicapping my finning movements. I caught up with him as he was clipping on the fourth reel of line which would hopefully take us to the end of the first siphon. He scampered ahead again but soon came back, bringing with him a cloud of silt which enveloped both of us. Using sign language he indicated that the passage ahead got narrow, and also could I please disentangle the line which had wrapped itself around his tank valves. He then thrust the reel into my hands with the obvious implication that I should take the lead since I had been through the siphon before and therefore ought to know the way.

In deteriorating visibility I probed ahead cautiously until getting to an unpleasant restriction which I did not remember from my previous visit 15 years before. I glimpsed an old piece of rotted line buried in the silt, a relic from the pioneering dives done here in the 1950's and 60's. I sensed the feeling of extreme isolation and loneliness which must have accompanied those early explorers when they first entered this cold, dark and inhospitable place. I felt in control of the situation but I definitely wasn't having fun as I groped around in zero visibility trying unsuccessfully to find the way on -it seemed like the passage had been nearly filled up with sediment. There was only one thing to do – retreat. I couldn't see Chris but I knew I'd found him again when our helmets 'clunked' together. I gave him a gentle shove in the direction of 'out', and with no further encouragement he was gone.

David Doolette and Tim Payne meanwhile had been patiently waiting for us to appear at the Pleasure Dome in Kubla Khan Cave – the plan had been to do another exchange through trip. It was a disappointment not to succeed in completing the through trip, but as my pommie cave diving friend, Scoff, put it, 'No one died so that's a positive result!'

REFERENCES

Frauca, H, (1959) The cave divers, People September 2 1959: 17-19.

Frauca, H. (1960) Deep dark dive. Australian Outdoors May 1960: 12-14, 78-79.

Roberston, D. (1977) Twelve hundred feet under at Mole Creek.

Speleo Spiel No.128. Stace, P. (1979) Cave diving in Tasmania. ASF Newsletter 84: 14-16.

Author: Stefan Eberhard

Reprinted from CDAA Guidelines September '98